

Notes from the President

In Appreciation of Our Armed Forces Personnel — Memorial Day 2014

05/22/2014

Memorial Day is a time when we pause to remember and honor the service by American men and women many of whom made the ultimate sacrifice as members of the U.S. Armed Forces. Thousands of Georgia Tech faculty, staff, students, and alumni have served, are now serving, or will serve in various branches of our nation's armed services, and we owe them all a great debt of gratitude as well.

This year's Memorial Day commemoration has the potential to be especially poignant for 240 Georgia Tech-Lorraine students who are in the summer program on our French campus in Metz. Just a few days later in Normandy, France, on June 6, they will participate in the 70th anniversary commemoration of D-Day, the first day of a massive World War II military campaign by Allied troops who began a march across Europe to free it from German occupation.

Our Georgia Tech-Lorraine students will have a unique opportunity to acknowledge the enormous sacrifices made by our Armed Forces personnel. President Barack Obama will attend, as will the Supreme Commander of NATO, General Philip Breedlove, a Georgia Tech alumnus. It will be an unforgettable experience. The American cemetery in Normandy overlooks Omaha Beach, one of the principal landing areas during the invasion. Buried there are 9,387 American service men and women, most of whom were killed during the Normandy invasion. A memorial wall nearby contains the names of 1,557 additional American service members who perished in the Normandy campaign, but could not be located or identified.

It's difficult to imagine the size and scope of that effort. Supported by more than 5,000 ships and 13,000 aircraft, more than 160,000 Allied troops came ashore along a 50-mile stretch of heavily fortified French coastline on June 6, 1944. General Dwight D. Eisenhower said "we will accept nothing less than full victory." The human toll on June 6, 1944, was enormous. More than 9,000 Allied soldiers, many close to the same age as the students who attend Georgia Tech today, were killed or wounded.

It wasn't the end of World War II, but it was the beginning of the end. Less than a year later, on May 7, 1945, Germany signed an act of military surrender, and the world celebrated V-E Day — Victory in Europe — on May 8, 1945. Huge public celebrations erupted throughout the world. The commemoration in Normandy on Monday will be more solemn, as we pause to remember the high cost so many have paid for our freedom.

Our world today is a much smaller place than it was in 1944. The sacrifices by those young men and women on D-Day, costly almost beyond imagination, helped set history on a course they could hardly have envisioned. We can connect the dots and see where they led, even to our own institution. Georgia Tech has grown into one of the world's most globalized technological universities. We have collaborations in more than 80 countries and institutional partnerships in more than 30 countries. In addition to our campus in France, not so very far from the beaches of Normandy, we have global centers in China, Singapore, Costa Rica, Ireland, and Panama. Georgia Tech students represent 115 countries, and 46 percent of our undergraduate students study, work, or research abroad prior to graduation.

Stateside, as we gather with friends and family for Memorial Day, there will be joy and fellowship, as there should be. My hope is that we will all also take time to reflect on those who have gone before us, as well as those who represent us today in uniform in far-flung points around the world. Be safe, and please accept our best wishes from Georgia Tech for a meaningful Memorial Day.

G. P. "Bud" Peterson
President, Georgia Tech